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Brazil

“A radically different alternative”

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This interview with Luciana Genro, presidential candidate of the PSOL, was first published in *Correio da Cidadania*, 30 August, 2014. It was conducted by Gabriel Brito and Valeria Nader.

What is your view on the present political conjuncture, in the run-up to the presidential elections?

Luciana Genro: Elections are always a very important moment, a time that encourages discussion on the future of the country. We are in a situation in which the three candidates who are the media favourites (Dilma Rousseff, Marina Silva and Aécio Neves) represent the same economic model, one that is rooted in the financialization of the economy, the domination of the banks and of agribusiness.

What do you think are the main problems and issues in Brazil today?

Luciana Genro: The main problem is that we have an economy that is oriented to the payment of the interest on the public debt. Brazil is making a huge fiscal effort. Over 50 per cent of tax collected comes from workers who earn up to three times the minimum wage, and a large part of these resources is used for the payment of interest on the debt. Forty per cent of our budget is used for this purpose, by a budgetary effort, while the primary surplus (the positive balance before interest payments) is 90 billion reals a year, which includes the Union, the federal states and the municipalities.

As a result, the entire economy is facing the payment of interest on the debt that only benefits a very small number of people. This represents approximately five thousand creditors (those who hold the debt, especially domestic holders), since the majority of the debt is held by banks. It is they who benefit from such an economic logic. The insufficiency of public services is largely due to this. In the area of health, for example, we have a structural lack of resources, a lack of doctors, hospitals, infrastructure. So the main problem really is all this tax effort that is made, for the benefit of a handful of speculators.

From this observation, there are solutions that can be proposed. The first of these is the need for an audit of the public debt, because there are a number of irregularities, which have already been identified by the Parliamentary Commission of Enquiry (CPI) on the debt, which was set up on the initiative of a member of the Federal Chamber, Ivan Valente (Socialism and Freedom Party - PSOL - São Paulo). The CPI showed that the question of the origin of the debt could be discussed, that there was a collection of interest on liabilities for interest (which is unconstitutional, according to the Brazilian Supreme Court itself) and that the decisions on interest rates were taken by the Central Bank on the basis of the opinion of supposedly independent analysts, all of whom were in reality linked to the financial markets.

All the irregularities signaled by the CPI should be further investigated as part of an audit, which would, in our view, lead to the cancellation of a significant portion of the debt, not least because twenty years ago Brazil produced a primary balance for the payment of the debt and this debt is constantly increasing, now reaching some 330,222.28 million dollars. Our first step would be the suspension of payment and an audit to verify whether we really still owe something.

Moreover, there should be a change in the tax structure of the country, a structure that is extremely unfair because it is the "middle class" and the poorest layers who make almost all the effort, whereas the multi-millionaires and the banks pay very little tax.

What is the importance of the 2014 elections for the left and what role can they, or should they, play in this contest?

Luciana Genro: Elections are very important, because that is when we manage to break through even slightly the media blockade of which our opinions are victims. Thus, there is free access to the media which, although very unevenly distributed, enables us to show that we are there. Coverage by the traditional media, although it is still very unfair and also distributed unevenly, gives us a space, whereas these media do not normally provide a platform for the proposals and opinions of the left.

Unfortunately, we have not succeeded in uniting with the PSTU (United Socialist Workers' Party) and the PCB (Brazilian Communist Party) parties for which I have very great respect, so as to form together a left opposition. We have failed to build this unity at the national level; it exists only in some states.

Yet despite the fact that we are separate, we have the same discourse of denunciation of the present economic policy, its unjust nature and the concentration of wealth, which are characteristics of the model established by the government of FHC (Fernando Henrique Cardoso) and pursued by the PT (Workers' Party).

So you do not consider that these representatives of the left have lost a great opportunity, opened by the massive protests in 2013 (and also in 2014), to stand in this election with greater political and social influence?

Luciana Genro: Of course I do! So much so that when I still had the opportunity of putting myself forward as a candidate for the vice presidency, a running mate for Senator Randolfe Rodrigues (the first name suggested by the PSOL as presidential candidate, who provoked strong opposition), I declined, in order to ensure the unity of the PSOL. It was of course after an internal debate that we took this decision. I declined to be a candidate for the vice presidency in order to ensure the unity of the PSOL, so that the PSTU and the PCB could come and make up the list and that they could not claim that the PSOL was showing itself to be "hegemonist" by wanting to occupy the top two places (as candidates for the presidency and the vice-presidency) on the list, which would have made the alliance unsustainable.

Unfortunately, they did not accept the offer of the PSOL at that point and preferred to stand their own candidates, positions that I respect, understand and regret. However, even separately, I think we are united in the same struggle and that it is not because of an electoral process in which we have different candidates that we will be not be together in the struggles, the social movements and the battles that are bound to take place after the elections.

If we consider the most fundamental aspects of the PSOL, how does the party fit into this scenario and on what programme is it going to stand in these 2014 elections?

Luciana Genro: The PSOL seeks to present itself as an alternative radically different to the three candidates that are frequently seen on television. So this is a great opportunity for us to show that we have an alternative proposal to what predominates in the political and electoral process due to extremely unfair coverage by the mainstream media.

The PSOL positions itself as a left opposition party. We came into existence because we saw that it was necessary to continue to defend the causes that had been abandoned by the PT. I was expelled from the PT (in 2003) for not having agreed to bend down before the pragmatism that wanted us to give up the demands of the left in order to join forces with figures like Sarney and Collor and implement an economic policy consistent with the interests of the financial markets. I am moreover proud of this expulsion, which attests to the fact that I did not give in, I did not sell out, I did not abandon my political ideas in exchange for power.

We also present a proposal that is structurally distinct from what the government is proposing, namely the conservative "continuism" of the PT. This is characterized by social liberalism, that is to say, a liberal economic policy which, through some wealth distribution programmes, claims to have a vaguely social coloration. Such redistributive programmes do nothing to change the situation, since all the choice morsels at the feast remain in the hands of big business. Nor do we accept the conservative retreat represented by Aécio and the PSDB (Party of Brazilian Social Democracy), who is slipping back into the mania for privatization of the toucans (the toucan is the symbol of Brazilian social democracy), going so far as to build an airport with public money so that he could give it to his own family!

Finally, we do not accept either the programme of Marina Silva, who claims to represent the "new politics", but who has, for example, a group of traditional advisers to coordinate her programme of government and who takes advice from economists historically linked to the PSDB to propose measures that are very close to the agenda of this party, such as for example the autonomy of the Central Bank.

So our proposal is radically opposed to the logic of the three economic programmes that all three candidates are defending. The principal measure is the debt audit and the suspension of payment of the debt. We also want a revolution in the structure of taxation; a tax increase on banks and big companies and fortunes would relieve the middle class and the workers.

It is necessary to put the BNDES (Brazilian Economic and Social Development Bank) at the service of micro and small enterprises, that is to say, of economic and social development, as indicated by the very name of the bank, rather than remaining at the service of large oligopolies and monopolies, as we have seen in the case of Friboi (the main Brazilian agribusiness multinational) which received 7 billion reals to buy smaller companies (installations of refrigeration for meat) and to further concentrate the industry.

It is a proposal that will change structurally the economy. And also politics. We advocate greater emphasis on direct participation by the people, through a mobilization of the population that would force Congress (both houses) to approve measures in the interest of the people, also through the use of plebiscites and referendums so that people can express themselves more directly on the main political issues in Brazil.

It is also necessary to promote a change in the political and electoral system, to end private funding of campaigns and to democratize the media by making it impossible for them to belong, as they do now, to big politically powerful groups. We need to develop small-scale media, community radio stations ... It is necessary to democratize access to television and to prevent a few families from completely controlling it, as is the case today.

Land reform is also fundamental, not only to take into consideration the rural population, but also to improve life in the cities by increasing the supply of healthier and cheaper food.

Finally, we have a whole series of changes which mean greater investment in what really interests the people, based on the logic that it is necessary to oppose certain interests. And these interests that must be challenged are those of big business, of the banks and the multinationals, those who are privileged by the present economic model.

Do you think that in the framework of these elections and in the context described here, the debate opened up by the PSOL and by the left in general will make itself heard and in one way or another make a difference?

Luciana Genro: I think we are managing to do that, to some extent. Despite all the difficulties and inequities of the electoral process, in terms of campaign structure, money, time and TV coverage, I think we are managing to have an audience with a significant sector of the population and especially with young people, who are quite eager for an

alternative to traditional politics.

I see it as a process of accumulation. The month of June 2013 showed that there was a negation old-style politics. The possibility of building a new kind of politics is becoming possible, because the negation of the old is the first step towards building the new. However, such building is a process.

Often we encounter obstacles in the middle of the road. The candidacy of Marina Silva is one of those obstacles, because it expresses a symbol that does not correspond to reality. The problem is that there exists among people who are refusing the old politics an important sector that has illusions in the candidacy of Marina, for the very reason that she has high visibility in the media which very much like candidacies coming from the system, but pretending to question this system, as is the case with her.

Anyway, we are accumulating strength. And I think that the PSOL will have a good election and that we will come out of it stronger to continue to lead the social struggles, struggles that are the best instrument to achieve real change in society.